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Viewing cable 06MANAMA409, LUNCHEON WITH KING HAMAD

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06MANAMA409	2006-03-15 13:42	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Manama

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9115>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9116>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/9117>
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This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000409

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [IR](#) [REGION](#) [OFFICIALS](#) [POL](#) [BILAT](#)

SUBJECT: LUNCHEON WITH KING HAMAD

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe. Reason: 1.4 (b)(d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) King Hamad, during a March 13 luncheon, had high praise for the U.S. and its positive role in maintaining stability in the Gulf. "Without you," he stated, "we'd be squashed." He made clear his concern for Iran, both as a regional power and as a meddling force inside Bahrain. Iran can be expected to bluster, but it is important to stand strong and deal with Iran from a position of strength. Kuwaiti Amir Shaikh Sabah's initial tour of the Gulf (he visited Bahrain March 12) was aimed in part at continuing his mission of improving relations between Saudi Arabia and its smaller GCC partners. The King lamented that his relationship with the UAE was not as personal or as close following the death of Shaikh Zayid. Domestically, the King welcomed expected participation by leading Shia opposition society Al-Wifaq in this year's parliamentary elections, and recounted that he had recently tried to encourage one of the few remaining opposition figures still in exile in London to come back. He stated that it was high time to pass a family law aimed at providing legal protection to women in Bahrain.

U.S.-BAHRAIN RELATIONS STRONG

12. (C) King Hamad invited the Ambassador, NAVCENT Commander Admiral Patrick Walsh, and DCM for a private lunch at Safriya Palace on March 13. Also attending on the Bahraini side were Minister of the Royal Court Shaikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, Minister of Interior Shaikh Rashid Al-Khalifa, and Benagas Chairman (and brother-in-law of the King) Shaikh Hamad Al-Khalifa, all close confidants of the King.

13. (C) King Hamad opened the discussion by welcoming Bahrain's strong relationship with the United States and praising the important positive role that the United States has played over the years in maintaining stability in the Gulf region. Turning to Admiral Walsh, the King noted the U.S. Navy's long presence in Bahrain and the vital role it has played in preserving Bahrain's security in a difficult regional environment. "We feel we are protected by your presence," he said. "Without you, we would be squashed." Returning to this theme later in the conversation, he also had high praise for the U.S. military equipment that the U.S. has provided to Bahrain under FMS/FMF programs. Other countries might be able to match the U.S. in terms of price and quality, he stated, but nobody comes close in terms of support.

WORRIES ABOUT IRAN

14. (C) Throughout the conversation, the King made clear his concern for Iran, both as a regional power and as a meddling force inside Bahrain. Iran is a concern to all GCC countries, he stated, but the spotlight is always on Bahrain. Bahrain still hears claims that Bahrain is a part of Iran. Even though this issue was settled by the United Nations (through a UN-organized referendum in 1970), the issue is still raised. There are many Iranians in Bahrain (he presumably meant, in addition to Iranians, Bahrainis of Iranian origin, or "Ajam"). Isa Qassim, one of the most prominent Shia clerics in Bahrain, goes to Iran every few months and spends considerable time there (he just went again last week). Shaikh Khalid interjected that one reason Isa Qassim travels to Iran is to court favor with the Iranian religious hierarchy in hopes of being anointed with a higher religious title. He aspires, Shaikh Khalid said, not simply to become an ayatollah, but to be proclaimed "wilayat al-faqih," something Shaikh Khalid doubts will ever happen.

15. (C) In dealing with Iran, the King said, it will be important to stand strong, and negotiate from a position of strength. He said that we can expect lots of bluster from Iran, but that if pressured it will back down. Nonetheless, he was worried that Iran, if it decided to retaliate, would hit back at Bahrain. "It can't hit America," he said, "but we are nearby and it knows that we are the closest of allies." When he met Iranian President Ahmadi-nejad at the OIC meeting in Mecca recently, he told him that the region had already had three wars and did not need another. Ahmadi-nejad smiled, but made no response.

16. (C) The King noted that many Shia complain that there are no Shia in the military leadership of the country. This is a question of loyalty, he stated. As long as Khamenei has the title of Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain must worry about the loyalty of Shia who maintain ties and allegiance to Iran.

FRICTIONS WITHIN THE GCC -- IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SAUDIS

17. (C) The King noted that Kuwaiti Amir Shaikh Sabah had passed through Bahrain the previous day as part of his tour of GCC countries to express appreciation for their support as he assumed the position of Amir. Also on his agenda was an

effort to continue the mission assigned to him by the GCC to try to improve relations between Saudi Arabia and its smaller GCC partners. This was especially important now given the difficult regional environment. The King expressed some frustration that the Saudis, given the relatively large size of their country, continue to let grievances with their GCC partners fester. Saudi Arabia, he said, should be the one to bring the GCC countries together, not divide them. The biggest problem is Saudi relations with Qatar, as Saudi King Abdullah remains personally hurt by Al-Jazeera. And Saudi Arabia still has territorial issues with the UAE.

18. (C) On the UAE, the King lamented that his relationship with the new UAE ruler is not as close as it had been with Shaikh Zayid. He said that Dubai ruler Mohammed bin Rashid had not handled the Dubai Ports issue well, especially by allowing talk of possibly canceling the Boeing purchase or moving 10 percent of its dollar-denominated investments into euros. Bahrain has heard "no" from the U.S. from time to time in the past, he said, but it has never let it damage the relationship. (Comment: Shaikh Zayid was believed to have been financially supportive to Bahrain as a country and to the Al-Khalifas as a royal family. It is quite likely that this support has been reduced or dried up, adding to the King's disappointment that the ruler-to-ruler relationship is not as close as it was under Shaikh Zayid. According to the Saudi Ambassador here, a third reason for Shaikh Sabah's trip to the Gulf was to reassure fellow GCC leaders who were not pleased by the precedent set by the involvement of Kuwait's parliament in Shaikh Sabah's accession to Amir. End comment.)

BAHRAINI ELECTIONS: LOOKING FORWARD TO SHIA PARTICIPATION

19. (C) King Hamad welcomed participation by leading Shia opposition society Al-Wifaq in this year's parliamentary elections, and discussed the fact that there is a clear split in Al-Wifaq. There are those moving towards contesting the elections under the leadership of Shaikh Ali Salman, and those who refuse to participate as exemplified by Hassan Mushaima. "We welcome those who want to participate," he stated, while some will continue to oppose participation out of their own self interest.

110. (C) The King pointed to the case of London-based opposition leader Said Al-Shehabi, who refused to return to Bahrain when most of the other opposition leaders in exile did after the reforms were announced in 2001. The King said that he recently sent a Shia emissary to London to engage with Al-Shehabi and encourage him to return and open up a business. The King said that he would even offer Al-Shehabi a Ministerial position, but he refused. (Comment: There is a precedent for that. Dr. Majid Al-Alawi returned after many years in exile, and is now Minister of Labor. End comment.) The King stated that Al-Shehabi is no doubt quite happy and comfortable in London, where he continues his opposition activities and is well funded by the Iranians. He has lived in his home village of Diraz, the King added, and most surely does not find it as attractive as London.

111. (C) The King expressed some frustration with the continuing demonstrations in Bahrain, which though small in size make things seem worse than they are in terms of stability. These people could be part of the system if they wanted, he stated. He noted that Shia activist Abdul Hadi Al-Khawaja had been so eager to paint the government in a bad light that he had erroneously accused the government of forcefully detaining two teenage girls during a demonstration on March 11. The allegation brought great embarrassment to the family when the missing girls turned up the next day to say they had not participated in the demonstration and had in fact been at a friend's house.

FAMILY LAW -- TIME TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE

112. (C) The King discussed the topic that has dominated the news in Bahrain in recent days -- the submission to parliament of the draft family law aimed at providing legal protection to women in Bahrain. The King stated that it was high time to deal with this issue. It was needed to provide legal protection for women and not have this left to the discretion of individual religious scholars who could interpret Sharia family law arbitrarily. There must be standards and clear guidelines, and that is what the law is designed to do.

113. (C) The Ambassador asked about opposition to the law as voiced by some Shia clerics and evidenced by the large demonstration against the law last November. The King noted that there were really two laws, one for the Sunni (Maliki) sect and one for the Shia (Ja'fari) sect. Religious scholars from both sects were consulted and contributed to the

drafting of the law. "If the Shia deputies don't approve,"
he stated, "we'll move forward with the Sunni version alone."
He was quite confident that the Sunni version, at least,
would pass.
MONROE